

FROM Washington

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Straight

Mubarak's Domino



TODAY'S GLAMOR issues of foreign policy—Central America, Soviet chemical and toxin warfare, European and U.S. ban-the-bomb movements—are not what currently intrigue Washington connoisseurs of diplomacy and geo-strategy. They are focusing on the twists and turns of Hosni Mubarak and Menachem Begin. Specifically, will Mubarak's refusal to visit Jerusalem set off a domino reaction, triggering a hostile response by Begin and leading to an Islamic crescent in flames?

Since taking command of the Egyptian government last October after the traumatic assassination of Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak has barely missed a beat. His leadership has been surefooted, skillful, realistic, and tough. His first order of business is the reintegration of Egypt into the Arab world—after Sadat's separation from it—and, indeed, capturing the leadership of that world, which he rightly judges to be up for grabs. Iraq is too spent by war to claim it. Saudi Arabia lacks the fire in the belly. Syria wants it but doesn't have the political stability to pursue and manage it.

Recently, Begin invited Mubarak to Israel, and urged him to visit Jerusalem, its capital, notwithstanding its electric symbolism for Arabs. Mubarak declined. A visit to Jerusalem could be interpreted as a gesture of approval of Begin's progressive annexation of the West Bank (which he sees as a swap for the Sinai).

So Mubarak set down the conditions under which he would come to Israel: only working sessions, no overnight stay, no visit to Jerusalem. To which Begin retorted, Thanks but no thanks. If you won't visit Jerusalem, don't bother visiting at all. Begin's point was that by keeping Jerusalem off his itinerary, Mubarak was really staging a protest demonstration, saying in effect that the annexation of East Jerusalem was and remains illegitimate. Also, one cannot conduct a state visit to Israel and avoid

Jerusalem, any more than one could spend a state visit to the United States entirely in, say, Philadelphia.

Mubarak's actions must be read against the backdrop of the Sinai, the last slice of which is only a few days away from being handed back to Egypt—lock, stock, oilfields, and airstrips. The divestiture is acutely painful for the Israelis, and the nation is jumpy and irascible. To their credit, they are fulfilling their agreement, but they are doing it with set teeth and white knuckles. In return Israel gets the promise of peace made by a man who has since been murdered, and whose successor is bent on realigning Egypt with Israel's foes, the Arab world. The Israelis are also aware that Al Haig in his State Department inner sanctum said (according to leaked minutes) that the Sinai is "the only thing keeping Egypt from going back to the pre-peace-treaty stance" toward Israel. Mubarak's refusal to go to Jerusalem makes that view all the more believable, of course.

THE Israelis, in general, are prone to interpret everything in the light of perceived good or bad faith. Egypt, by reason of Mubarak's resurrection of Arab ties culminating in his Jerusalem no-go, falls into the bad-faith category, and so everything is jaundiced. The 15-odd disputed demarcations between the Sinai and Israel, for example, will be litigated by Israel on the basis of "no more concessions," says Ariel Sharon, the Defense Minister. Likewise, on the status of Jerusalem, "no more concessions," says Sharon. The inexorable annexation of the West Bank has taken on fresh impetus; the potential invasion of southern Lebanon will be reassessed in light of Egypt's putative bad faith. "No more blows to our national pride," vows Sharon. If the Israelis were looking for an excuse to hardline it, Mubarak has handed it to them.

Assuming that Mubarak's saying no

to a Jerusalem visit really amounted to setting off a domino reaction, what is the second entry in the domino scenario? The invasion of Lebanon by Israel? Then the dominoes fall fast: the Syrians launch their Bekka Valley SAMs and President Assad, still doing a slow burn from Israel's Golan Heights annexation and thinking that war will unify his threatened political support, declares war. While, of itself, Syria cannot win a war with Israel, it can inflict bloody ruin—with 225,000 men under arms, another 100,000 in reserves that can be activated on short notice, 3,700 tanks, and 450 jet warplanes. Also, the Soviets will not hesitate to help Syria.

Should this happen, the PLO, the West Bank, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, and possibly Iran and Algeria would be sucked into the hellish eddy. Saudi Arabia would be pressured to retaliate against Israel's main ally, the United States. Up would go the price of oil, unemployment and prices would skyrocket, our economy would go into a tailspin and crash. That's one hypothesis.

The non-domino scenario is more probable, and goes like this: Begin proceeds with his annexation of the West Bank. It is then more likely than not that he will go on to order the penetration of southern Lebanon, but this is contingent on PLO behavior and on what Israeli intelligence learns about the volume of arms deliveries to the PLO over the last several months.

Retaliation by Syria is quite unlikely. For Assad's political survival, he needs an intact military, not a humiliated one. The Soviets, moreover, would withhold the nod, since they are preoccupied with problems of succession (Brezhnev is dying), Poland, Afghanistan, and a wretched economy. As for the other Arab states' getting drawn in, the Arab world is not unitary, not one big ball of wax that rolls or melts on command. In the Iran/Iraq war, Jordan is supporting Iraq, Syria is supporting Iran.

Less plausible though the domino reaction is, it is far from unthinkable, as four Middle Eastern wars since Israel's birth show.

What is left of Camp David—Palestinian autonomy—depends upon the composure and trust of the Israelis, both of which are now shot. They would be in much better shape had Mubarak gone to Jerusalem. Mysteriously enough, the path to Middle East peace, it appears, travels through the Holy City. □

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